

New Cross considered: 2

The march of black outcast London

Martin Kettle

"We got the power," chanted the delighted demonstrators in pukka Cavendish Place as last week's West Indian march neared its end at Hyde Park. Minutes earlier, the crowd had come to a halt outside the Zambian High Commission when police arrested a marcher. "Let him go; let him go," they shouted. And faced with a militant crowd which showed no sign of moving until it got its way, the police did let him go. "We got the power," the refrain began immediately.

The march, which took place on Monday 2 March, was quite unlike any other recent mass crowd in central London. It was black. It was militant. It wouldn't stand much messing from the police. It broke a lot of unwritten rules. It forced some significant changes in police policy. And it exploded onto the front pages.

The first confrontation was in Blackfriars Road, south of the river. The march, protesting about the unsolved deaths of 13 young blacks in the Deptford fire of 18 January, had already covered five miles through some of the most run-down parts of south east London. As it approached Blackfriars Bridge, the police tried to funnel it into a more orderly shape. They chose their moment badly. The march came to a halt alongside a building site. Missiles were ready to hand. A brief skirmish developed and the riot shields came out.

Whether they knew it or not, the police had chosen to act where their predecessors down the centuries have chosen to act. The crossing of the river is a challenge to authority. In its rhetoric, the British state may fight on the beaches. In practice, it has a tradition of fighting on the bridges of the Thames.

More than 500 years ago, Kentish rebels under Jack Cade, encamped in Southwark, fought a bitter and losing struggle against the City of London for control of London Bridge—until the 18th century the only way across the Thames. In April 1848, the military and a massive force of special constables took their stand at the bridges to stop the huge Chartist rally on Kennington Common from spilling across the river to challenge parliament with its demands.

On one level, last week's march was a single-issue protest—against the white racists who have attacked black homes during the last year and who are widely thought to have caused the Deptford "massacre"; against the police who are charged with failing to solve the terrible crime; and against the press and government, who are accused of indifference. But, on another level, which was reached in Blackfriars

Road, the march transcended these issues. It was an act of outrage and defiance by part of the black community against the way it is treated in Britain today.

The traditional white march has largely become a ritualised moral gesture. The statement is made in oblique ways. The marchers go out of their way to tell you who they are. The primary task of their many banners is to identify their organisations. Only then, and on some demonstrations rarely even then, do the banners say what the protest is about.

Last week's march adopted some of these styles—at first. But there were few organisational banners, since this was no formalised protest. Instead, each banner starkly named a dead young person, their dates of birth, and their common date of death.

The route was chosen to highlight the grievances. This took it up Fleet Street. Two hours before the crowd reached the area, young rastas were congregated in Ludgate Circus. It looked as though the street of shame was in for a tough time. But when the march did arrive, it acted unpredictably.

The crowd ran pell-mell across Blackfriars Bridge, and round into Fleet Street. The loudspeaker van, carrying the march organisers and the continuous band, surged repeatedly through hastily and unsuccessfully formed police lines. The *Daily Express* and the *Daily Telegraph* buildings loomed ahead. But the crowd swept past them, as if they were now irrelevant. It was not newspaper offices in Fleet Street that took the anger. It was a jeweller's, a betting office, a newspaper stall.

The power of the crowd

You sensed, in this narrow canyon of offices that links the City with the West End, why central Paris was rebuilt in wide boulevards after 1848, to preclude barricade building. The crowd began to feel its own power here in Fleet Street. That was why shop windows were smashed. It was an explosion of the dispossessed.

This march reached back, unconsciously, to traditions of London conflict which are all but lost. Even the coffin which headed the throng recalled the past—the coffin carried by the unemployed marchers of the 1930s. Even more, it rekindled the atmosphere of the London of the 1880s.

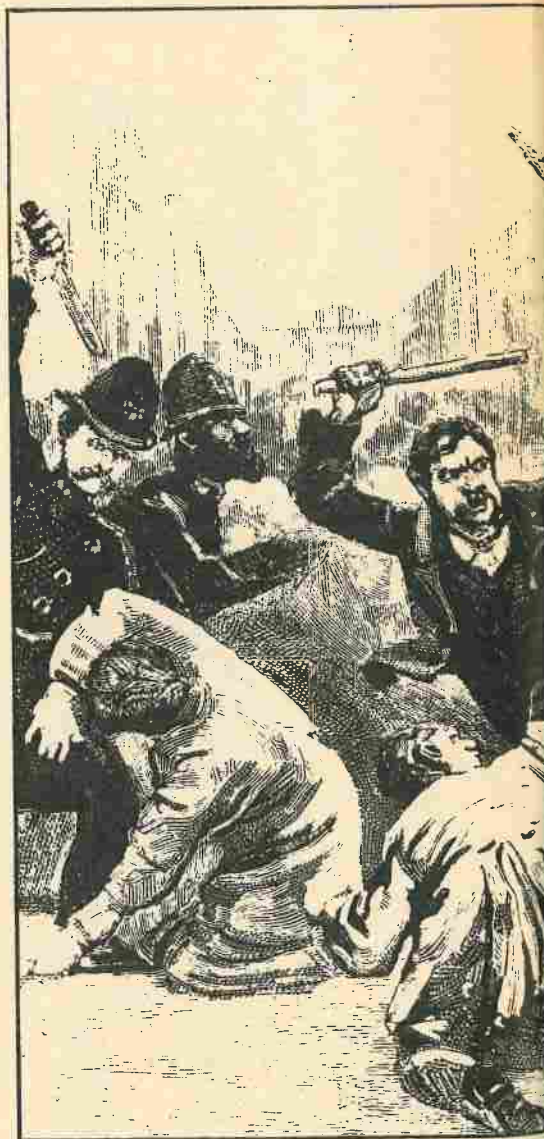
This was the time when the capital of the Victorian empire was seized with social panic at the threat of the casual poor from what the historian, Gareth Stedman Jones, has called "outcast London." In 1886, a Trafalgar Square rally, demanding public

works and import tariffs as a solution to unemployment—developed into a full-scale riot.

"The West End was for a couple of hours in the hands of the mob." The *Times* leader of 9 February 1886 was vividly echoed in the *Sun* of 3 March 1981: "For seven hours a frenzied mob took part in an orgy of looting and destruction in the West End." On 10 February 1886, the *Times* reported "roughs in 1000s trooping to West." Last week, the *Daily Express*, under the headline, "RAMPAGE OF A MOB," reported the dangerous role of "gangs of rowdies." And, in an uncanny parallel, the *Times* of 11 February 1886 carried the rumour (untrue as it proved) that "10,000 men were on the march from Deptford to London, destroying as they came the property of small traders."

The following year, 1887, reveals further rich parallels. The battles between the unemployed and the police—culminating in the events of "Bloody Sunday" on 13 November—coincided with a year of frantic royal celebrations. It was the golden jubilee of Queen Victoria, described by E. P. Thompson as "the inauguration of the 'modern' concept of royalty."

William Morris might have been writing



of the royal wedding and the economic recession of 1981 when he said: "Even this vulgar Royal Upholstery procession, trumery as it is, may deepen the discontent a little, when the newspapers are once more empty of it and when people wake up, as on the morrow of a disgraceful orgie, and find dull trade all the duller for it, and have to face according to their position the wearisome struggle for riches, for place, for respectability, for decent livelihood, for bare subsistence, in the teeth of growing competition in a society now at last showing its rottenness openly."

Is it too fanciful a parallel with Morris to suppose that the "chants abusing the Queen" were fuelled by the waves of media attention to Prince Charles and Lady Diana?

These echoes and parallels must be made with care. For if London's blacks are today's "outcast London," they are cast out in ways more intractable than faced the unemployed of a century ago. For today's white unemployed are not rioting in the streets—not yet at any rate. And while some newspapers' racist exaggerations of last week's march (and their racist neglect of the fire) can be compared to the antagonism of the Victorian press, today's

police have reacted in a much less crude manner than Sir Charles Warren when he loosed the police upon the unemployed on Bloody Sunday.

Some degree of Scotland Yard sensitivity to the anger in the black community must, for instance, be acknowledged in the otherwise unusual permission for the march to take place on a busy working day. (This did, though, have an advantage for the police. Because no marches may come within a mile of Westminster while parliament is sitting, last week's crowd was prevented from ending its trek—as the organisers had wished—at Scotland Yard itself, only a few hundred yards from parliament.)

Equally, there is little doubt that, if it had wished to do so, Scotland Yard could have deployed far more officers at strategic points, and simply forced the crowd to do as it was ordered. Rather than face the mass battle which such tactics would surely have provoked, the police strategy was to let events run their course—at the cost of temporary lack of control and isolated looting. As the *New Standard* observed: "The number of arrests was not high, com-
"*Bloody Sunday*" is one historical parallel with the blacks' march: police battles in Westminster in 1887, as seen by the "Graphic"

pared with, for example, the average West Ham home fixture." This sort of comment was in sharp contrast to the hysterical tone adopted in much of the rest of the press. (It was the *Times's* belated credit that on Wednesday 4 March, after its own first coverage, it printed a prominent article by Lucy Hodges, making this point about the press.)

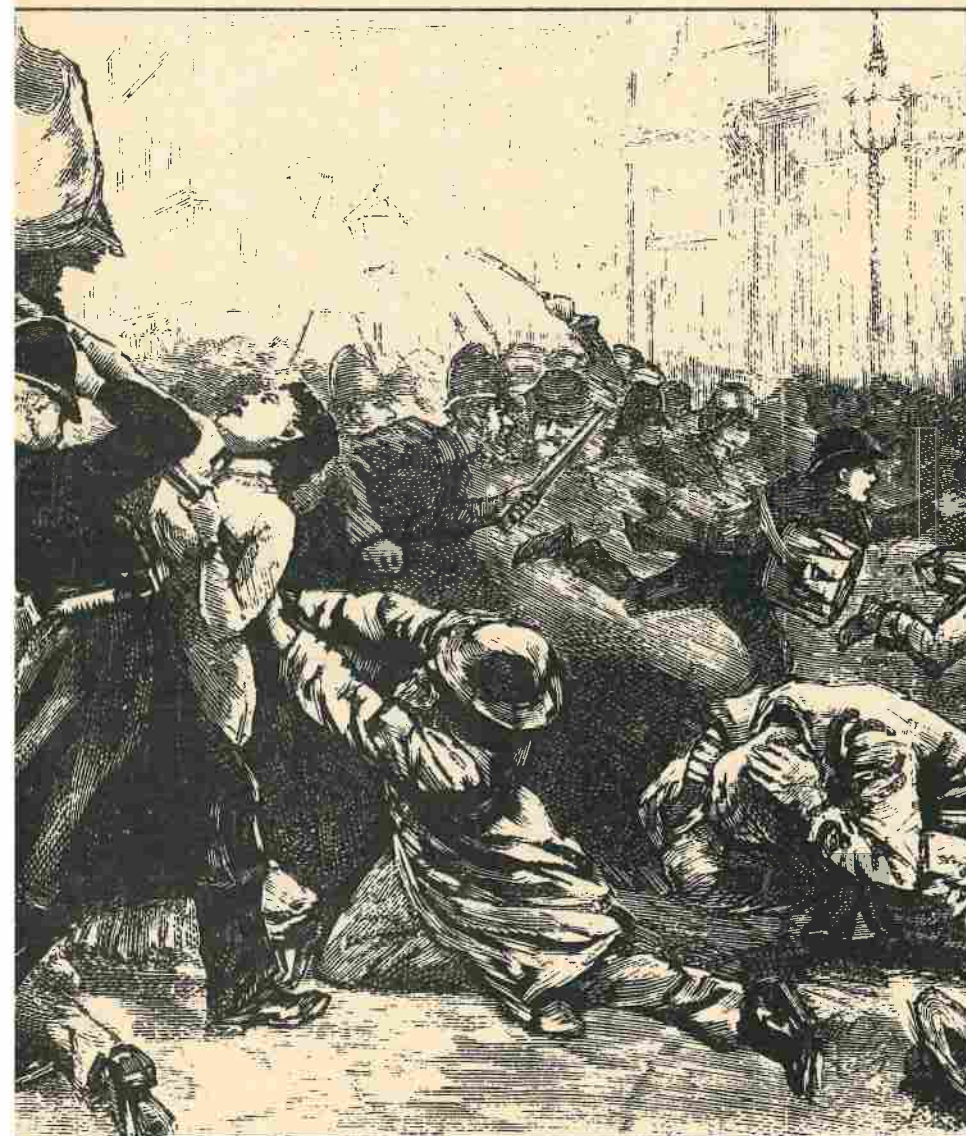
On the day after the march, the *Daily Mail* quoted a police officer as saying: "We were told to bend over backwards to be fair to the marchers—and then to bend over a bit more." Many observations bear this out. The release of the arrested demonstrator in Cavendish Place. The willingness, after the ill-fated attempt in Blackfriars Road, to let the march stray right across streets. (This is something which London's police, armed with yards of white tape, bollards and crush barriers, have been absurdly reluctant to do since the Vietnam marches of the 1960s.) The generally passive response to relentless bad-mouthing from the marchers.

There were, of course, police actions which heightened the tension and which might have been avoided. The Blackfriars Road incident, for example. The use of police cavalry through the shopping districts of the West End. And the persistent use of the police's favourite toy—the spy-in-the-air helicopter, beaming back its highly focused television pictures to the Scotland Yard control room.

The march organiser was Darcus Howe, editor of *Race Today* and a member of the New Cross Massacre Action Committee. He was surely right to say that "it was a historic demonstration." Not only did it force an issue which was otherwise remaining in unjustifiable neglect. It also changed the policy of the authorities to policing demonstrations.

Last Wednesday, in the aftermath of the march, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir David McNee performed a u-turn on his long-established policy of refusing to use his powers to apply for bans on marches under the Public Order Act, 1936. Many times in the past five years, he has resisted pressure to apply for bans on any grounds other than that he expected serious public disorder which the police would be unable to control. In 1980, Lewisham council refused to pay its precept to the police because of one such refusal. Yet last last week—with the prior public encouragement of the Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, the man who finally issues the bans—McNee asked for bans to stop last Saturday's planned National Front march in Deptford.

It was a decision taken on political grounds so that the police should not appear on Lewisham's streets to be protecting the National Front. Such decisions may or may not be welcome—to civil libertarians they seem a dangerous power—but last week's ban is a major change in policy nonetheless. Will it do much to defuse the anger of London's blacks towards the police? That may need a longer march.



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